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SUBJECT: Senegal: President Wade Trounced in Local Elections

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On March 22, voters in Senegal's major cities voted against the ruling coalition in municipal, rural, and regional elections. Although the results are still unofficial, large cities such as Saint-Louis, Thies, Kaolack, Diourbel, Louga, Fatick, and the capital city Dakar will fall to the opposition. President Abdoulaye Wade threw all his weight behind this election and quickly turned it into a referendum on his rule. By rejecting his party's candidates, voters sent Wade a clear message that their desire for better governance and economic development has not been met by his administration. End Summary.

Landslide for the opposition

¶2. (SBU) Preliminary results indicate that voters in major cities have massively rejected the Sopi ("change") coalition led by the ruling Democratic Party of Senegal (PDS), preferring to hand over the reins of local power to the "Benno Siggil Senegaal" (United to Save Senegal) coalition of opposition parties as well as a host of smaller individual coalitions. Wade's former Prime Minister, Macky Sall, who set up his own party after being ignominiously ousted by Wade as speaker of the National Assembly, was instrumental in this defeat. He won his hometown of Fatick and in areas where he ran under his own banner of "Dekkal NGor" (Reviving loyalty), he received a significant number of votes; mostly from people who were angry at the manner in which Sall was treated and who would have normally voted for the President's SOPI coalition. At this early stage, it appears that five of the country's largest cities were won by this coalition. Idrissa Seck, another former Prime Minister who fell out of favor before recently reconciling with Wade, ran in his hometown of Thies (the second largest city) where he seems to have built up an insurmountable lead, defeating the Sopi candidate.

Serious Warning

¶3. (SBU) The outcome of this election is a serious political defeat and warning to Wade. His administration failed to deliver on promises to create jobs, reduce the cost of living, and provide basic services in major cities where large segments of the population live in precarious conditions. Observers view the result of this election as a rejection of Wade's choice of self-serving local government politicians who receive fat salaries, sell land assets in their jurisdictions, and systematically desert their cities to remain in Dakar where they conduct their own businesses or occupy positions in the cabinet or the National Assembly.

Ingredients of the defeat

¶4. (SBU) Despite the fairly low turnout (rough preliminary projections puts the figure at around 40 percent), those Senegalese who did vote took this opportunity to make a statement. Primarily, they told Wade that he should think twice about his scheme to have his son Karim succeed him. The latter will clearly not be the mayor of Dakar as the opposition won a convincing 14 of 19 districts up for grabs. That job will likely fall to Khalifa Sall, a leading figure of the Socialist Party who led the Benno coalition in Dakar. Wade was overconfident about his personal capacity to compensate for the deficiencies of his local government leaders with his characteristic blend of charisma and pugnacious populism. Because

of overconfidence, Wade failed to renew his party's grassroots leadership, which would have allowed the emergence of more credible competitors in local elections. His attempt to cover up the poor management of his mayors by embarking on a poorly planned and largely unsuccessful national "economic" campaign in the run-up to elections outraged many Senegalese who thought that the President's use of state resources in a partisan way during a local election campaign was an alarming and unethical departure from constitutional tradition whereby the head of state remains out of the local fray. Wade also failed to manage the rivalries and frustrations in his own camp. For instance, the leaders of the ruling party in Saint-Louis and Parcelles Assainies, two massive electoral basins, ran against each other, thus dividing the vote and handing victory to the opposition coalition. In Dakar, some believe that the supporters of soon-to-be ex-Mayor Pape Diop purposely voted against their own party in order to foil President Wade's attempt to install his son as the next Mayor of the city at the expense of Diop.

Against all odds

15. (SBU) The Casamance region, against all odds, was largely won by President Wade's party. Abdoulaye Balde, the Secretary General of the Presidency and a close political ally of Karim, proved an able politician and is poised to become the next mayor of Ziguinchor. Robert Sagna, who has been mayor of the city since 1985 and held various minister portfolios when the Socialists were in power, is viewed by locals as not having accomplished much for the city in recent years. Balde was able to take advantage of this local dissatisfaction and soundly defeat the incumbent. Balde's victory is perhaps one of this election's most intriguing outcomes, especially now that the leader of the Generation du Concrete (GC), Karim Wade, has been soundly beaten. Balde has clearly proven

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himself by winning in the Ziguinchor region while carrying a several ministers on his considerable coattails. With Karim Wade's political aspirations on life support as a result of his stinging defeat, Balde becomes the de facto leader of the GC and may figure prominently in what will be an all but certain Cabinet re-shuffle and may become, along with Seck and Sall, a contender for the presidency in 2012.

Ministers Go Down

16. (SBU) In several major cities the opposition inflicted huge casualties on President's Wade cabinet. In Saint-Louis, Cheikh Bamba Dieye's victory means that all the ministers who were on SOPI's majority list will not be taking a seat in the city's municipal council. These include Interior Minister Cheikh Tidiane Sy, Minister of Mines Ousmane Ngom, Minister of Decentralization and current Mayor Ousmane Masseck Ndiaye and the Minister of Sports, Bacar Dia. In Fatick, the Minister of Culture Mame Birame Diouf, was soundly beaten by Macky Sall's coalition. In Thies the Minister of Agriculture, Hamath Sall, joined Education Minister Moustafa Sourang in being defeated by Idrissa Seck and his coalition.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) This landmark election confirmed that the people of Senegal are tired of President Wade's misrule and his mismanagement of the country's finances. It is also clear that the Benno coalition did far better than they even they expected. This election also confirms Idrissa Seck and Macky Sall's political strength and has brought Balde to the forefront of Senegal's political scene. However, the opposition remains a motley crew of some twenty-plus parties and there will be many battles in the days ahead as the winning candidates will jockey among themselves to become Mayors of the cities where they were elected. Meanwhile, the President cannot be written off because he retains a great capacity to influence the management of their cities, given that he still controls both the Treasury, that funds the city councils, and the National Assembly, that can pass any legislation he wishes. What the President will do now and how he will spin the results remains to be seen. If Wade sticks to his script he will probably blame his Ministers, then fire them and use a Cabinet reshuffle to show the people he got their

message. Beyond that it is a wait and see which Wade emerges - the autocrat who will stubbornly stay the course to manage his succession or the reconciler who will grudgingly reach out to a newly invigorated opposition.

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